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Honors Thesis

No. 334: A Visual Exploration of Race and Identity

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April 2, 2012

Advisor: Professor Steve Hansen

Primary Advisor Signature: _____

Department: _____

No. 334: A Visual Exploration of Race and Identity

Abstract

Throughout history, humans have invented several methods of classification—most of which I find unsettling. The human need to classify is one that is deeply rooted in the search for identity. This senior thesis project is essentially a documentation of my journey to finding, understanding, and accepting my identity, through the lens of human classification based on physical attributes. Through the research of various human classification systems, such as scientific racism and somatotyping, and through the creation of a compelling body of artwork, I want to both inform and disturb the viewer while raising questions about classification, race, and identity.

No. 334: A Visual Exploration of Race and Identity

At the center of human nature lies the need to classify, to distinguish, and to justify the world in which we live, from minute detail to monumental facet of human existence. Even more significant to human nature is the need to establish identity—who we are and where we fit in. The human need to both belong and to be set a part, is a compelling theme that I feel I must explore. My own life's journey to this point has been filled with the hunger to belong and yet be set a part.

Growing up, I struggled with accepting my physical appearance. I was Black, I am Black, and always will be classified as Black; however, I wanted to be anything *but* what I actually was. Thinking about my childhood, I was never explicitly told that I was less-than because of my dark skin, big lips, or my 'wooly' hair, even so, I knew that I didn't look like my Barbie dolls or most of the women on magazine covers. Somehow, I began to think that being me wasn't enough. I spent a lot of time comparing myself to others who had lighter skin, finer hair, and more delicate facial features.

Now that I'm older and I've begun to grasp my personal concept of identity, I've developed a need to explore my past and relate it to various methods of human classification. I am fascinated by the clinical way that scientific racism, ethnology, anthropometry, and the process of somatotyping in the early 1900s visually present their findings. I find old photographs of human specimens to have a quiet unsettling characteristic about them. It is this unsettling characteristic that pushes me to explore the ideas surrounding the classification of humans based on physical characteristics.

Background

Scientific Racism, or sometimes called racial anthropology, can be defined as the use of scientific—or seemingly scientific—findings from the late 1800s through the mid-1900s to explain and investigate the differences between races. Woven throughout the concept of

scientific racism are branches of scientific classification such as craniology and phrenology, or the use of skull measurements to determine intelligence and inferiority among the races, anthropometry, or the branch of anthropology that uses measurements of the human body and its parts to classify humans, and polygenism, the theory that human races come from different origins.

Eighteenth century Dutch anatomist, Petrus Camper, was one of the first to use measurements of human facial features in comparison with those of other animals—mainly apes. Camper used the skull of an ape, a ‘young Negro’ man, and a European man to measure the facial angle, or the angle between a line drawn from the front teeth to the forehead intersecting horizontal plane on which the skull was placed; to Camper, these measurements revealed that the young Negro was closer to the ape in anatomy and intelligence (Graves 41). Several scientists during that time used findings such as Camper’s to support the disturbing idea that Africans, or Negroids, could not live unless ruled by Europeans. This led to the general belief in the inferiority of the Negroids—based on physical appearance—and validated slavery as being in the best interest for both races; any form of higher intelligence, or genius, found in a Negroid was thus attributed to the European presence in his or her life.

The belief of Negroid inferiority not only perpetuated slavery, but it created a sort of novelty which surrounded Africans and any sort of non-European such as Native American or East Asian people—even after slavery was abolished. The physical differences among the races created a type of disturbing curiosity in the general public and it is this curiosity that further perpetuated the de-humanization of those who had non-European features. In 1906, a Congolese man named Ota Benga was taken from his home in the country of Belgian Congo and brought to the United States to be exhibited in the Bronx Zoo’s Monkey House. Due to his short stature, Ota Benga, 22 years old at the time, was a sight to see while living in the monkey cage; it is said that an estimated 40,000 visitors a day came to see him (George, et al). A group of outraged African-American ministers pressured the Bronx Zoo to release Ota, and, finally, he

was released to live in churches and orphanages for the rest of his life. However, Ota never fully adjusted to life outside of the Congo and he shot himself in 1916.

Thankfully, the various branches of scientific research surrounding scientific racism are now seen as pseudoscience informed by biased conclusions unsupported by legitimate data. According to Joseph L. Graves, Jr., the idea of biological races has been disproved through genetics (5). He believes that the expression ‘race’ points to there being “nontrivial underlying hereditary features shared by a group of people and not present in other groups” and that such physical traits as skin color, hair type, body stature, blood group, and disease prevalence do not qualify as definitions of race (Graves 5). Essentially, Graves believes that race cannot be determined by looking at one’s genes; therefore, the concept of race is a myth.

Although scientific racism is a major form in which humans have tried to classify each other, the pseudoscience of somatotyping transcends race and measures psychological state and personality traits based on body-type. American psychologist William Herbert Sheldon was the pioneer of this method of classification, and in his book, *Atlas of Men: A Guide for Somatotyping the Adult Male at All Ages*, Sheldon describes three different body-types: endomorphic, mesomorphic, and ectomorphic. The endomorphic body is one that is usually described as fat, the mesomorphic body as muscular, and the ectomorphic body as slim or skinny. *Atlas of Men: A Guide for Somatotyping the Adult Male at All Ages*, contains clinical photographs of men grouped by the various somatotypes, graphs, and charts which Sheldon uses to link to certain psychological characteristics such as delinquency or schizophrenia.

In addition to these various photographs and charts, Sheldon pairs each of the body-types and their subcategories with illustrations of animals; such as a bobcat for a mesomorph and a rhinoceros for an endomorph. Sheldon also created a system and scale from which one can numerically determine somatotypes. Although Sheldon did not create an ‘Atlas of Women’ I found that I resonated with the number 334. Sheldon’s premise that physical characteristics are directly correlated with psychological characteristics is one that I don’t agree with. However,

based on the height and weight characteristics of this number, and also the personality traits attributed that number, I feel as if I could be classified as a 334. Sheldon's description intrigued me,

"These 334s are caught just about halfway between and in their overt behavior, as well as in their dreams, they look both ways. Many of them turn up as delinquent youths, although never as persistent or successful criminals. Sometimes they try to be athletes or 'regular fellows' and lose their youth in a hopeless pursuit of muscle culture of trying to be tough. Many go quite the other way and do well at academics or at some artistic pursuit" (142).

The need to classify myself came about at an early age—it was when I realized that I didn't want to look like me. I wanted to fit into a physical classification that was not my own. I don't quite know how, but I stumbled upon the idea that having dark skin and 'nappy' hair was undesirable. I wanted to look like the majority of my friends. I wanted to look like Cindy Crawford. I wanted to look like my sister, who had lighter skin than me. My Barbies were blonde and tan, and in my dreams, I was too.

I was never explicitly told that being Black was bad, in fact, my parents made sure to educate my siblings and I about the good things about being Black—we watched a lot of *The Cosby Show*. However, I couldn't shake the feelings of inadequacy surrounding my dark skin and 'Black facial features'. I remember a specific instance when my grandmother—whose skin was much lighter and hair much finer than mine—pinched the bridge of my nose telling me that she didn't want me to have a flat nose. She told me that I was already dark but I could perhaps change the way my nose looked by pinching my bridge. Turns out that I couldn't change the way I look, so I compensated by being 'smart' and doing well in school. Academics became my identity; I felt that it was all I had to offer.

Now that I'm older, I can look back and see how my childhood experiences have shaped the perception I have of myself. I now know that my grandmother—who was born in the 1920s—was only trying to help me in the way that she knew how, based on the society that she was raised in: a society where the lightness of your skin was directly correlated to your socioeconomic status. I now know, based on my childhood thoughts, I was just trying to place myself within the classification that has been society's preferred racial group for as long as it's existence. The differences in myself that I rejected, I am now embracing. My experiences as a child have created a curiosity about physical characteristics and their use in determining non-physical characteristics—racial or non-racial. The mere act of grouping people together and trying to figure them out based on how they look is both disturbing and oddly interesting. It is this interest that pushes me to explore the themes of race, identity, and methods of human classification in my own life.

Methodology

Although there is research involved in my project, ultimately, the nature of this project is deeply introspective—thus the creative process will vary. However, the general methodology begins with both visual and traditionally academic research from which inspiration is gleaned. I will then give the research materials a personal application, which will lead to the creation of a body of original artwork.

My interest in science and my training in Graphic Design have flavored my Fine Art education; therefore, the creative expression of my research is also be influenced by the diverse disciplines of my education. My research involves exploring the concept of the human need to classify and the need to find identity within those classifications.

I began by conducting research on the subjects of scientific racism, or racial anthropology, anthropometry, craniology, and American psychologist William Herbert Sheldon's practice of somatotyping. I was inspired by the imagery used to display these various

classification systems, and plan to reinvent this imagery with oil paintings and printed materials. The painting process began with a compilation of photo references of models, and continued with creating drawing studies of these various models to finalize the composition of the paintings. Next, I created smaller, painted studies of the finalized concept, which examined the models' different skin tones and various positions. Finally, I began the process of creating the actual large-scale paintings.

In getting to this point in my Thesis project, I faced the challenges of narrowing down my subject, providing a point of conceptual accessibility to a larger audience, and finding a way to marry my personal story with the scientific nature of my research findings. The topics surrounding classification, race, and identity are abundant; it became apparent to me that I needed to find an angle in which my personal involvement with the subject matter could both differentiate my project from what's been done before and provide the viewer with a way to become involved with the work. My Thesis project evolved from being about race and beauty to becoming a deeply introspective journey about race, classification, and the innate need for establishing identity. Not only will the viewer become involved with the work, but the viewer will be informed and somewhat challenged by the information's unconventional presentation.

Influences & Inspiration

While the ideas of race, classification, and identity are not new ideas, the way they will be displayed in my exhibit is. Two artists that have been influential to me are Lorna Simpson and Sasha Huber. Both Simpson and Huber discuss race and identity—among other concepts—in their work. Simpson uses photography, ink, video installations, found objects, and screen-printing techniques in her work, while I will be using oil paintings and some print material to express my findings. Huber uses photography, video, print design, performance, and sculpture in her work. In her multi-faceted project, *(T)RACES OF LOUIS AGASSIZ*, Sasha Huber

explores the themes surrounding racial classification through and describes her project like this:

“The abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and of slavery provided a special context for textual and visual forms of classifying humankind in terms of racial hierarchies, based on the notion of fixed racial differences, both intrinsic and extrinsic. Many racist thinkers even denied the unity of humankind, proposing the existence of distinct human races. Through the use of new technical resources, such as photography, these theories developed new ways of capturing and representing the human body, seen as a vehicle of racial traits to be revealed by the discriminating eye of the scientist or scholar. The science of race, although rapidly discredited in terms of its scientific ambitions, has persisted to this day in the ways that different ethnic groups as well as colonial or postcolonial peoples continue to be seen and represented visually. This project includes a public exhibition, an academic discussion, and a publication, drawing together historical photographs, critical texts, and contemporary artistic works” (Huber 2010).

Huber’s piece, *Somatological Triptych of Sasha Huber*, is especially influential to me as she uses the same visual representation that William Herbert Sheldon used in his studies. Although she and I both borrow Sheldon’s themes of visual representation, I will be displaying my findings by using paintings as opposed to solely using photography like Sheldon and Huber.



Agassiz: The Mixed Traces Series. Somatological Triptych of Sasha Huber. Furnas de Agassiz in the Tijuca Forest, Rio de Janeiro, 2010.



Postcard of Furnas de Agassiz in the Tijuca Forest, Rio de Janeiro, 1908.

In his book, *Atlas of Men: A Guide for Somatotyping the Adult Male at All Ages*, Sheldon thoroughly explains his somatotyping methods by using charts, photographs, and written descriptions. He talks about the three somatotypes mesomorphic, ectomorphic, and endomorphic; these somatotypes are matched to correlating numbers and graphs. Sheldon does not categorize women in this book; however, he occasionally provides brief descriptions of women within the context of certain somatotypes. Sheldon also attributes certain measurements to certain personality traits such as, criminal behavior, delinquency, or the chance of developing schizophrenia.

Sheldon's study was one that transcended race; he compiled data from several thousand men and looked at height, weight, and age to determine personality. I find Sheldon's study to be interesting and I see what he was trying to achieve: his goal was to connect psychology to physical attributes. Although I do not agree with Sheldon's hypothesis, I find the graphs and images used in Sheldon's book to be aesthetically pleasing; his methods of classification serve as visual inspiration for me. The image below is an example of the visual language used in the *Atlas of Men: A Guide for Somatotyping the Adult Male at All Ages*. In an effort to conceal the identity of these men, the face and genitals are cut out of the images. Each of the photographed men is displayed in three positions: front view, profile view, and back view—which adds to the clinical feel.

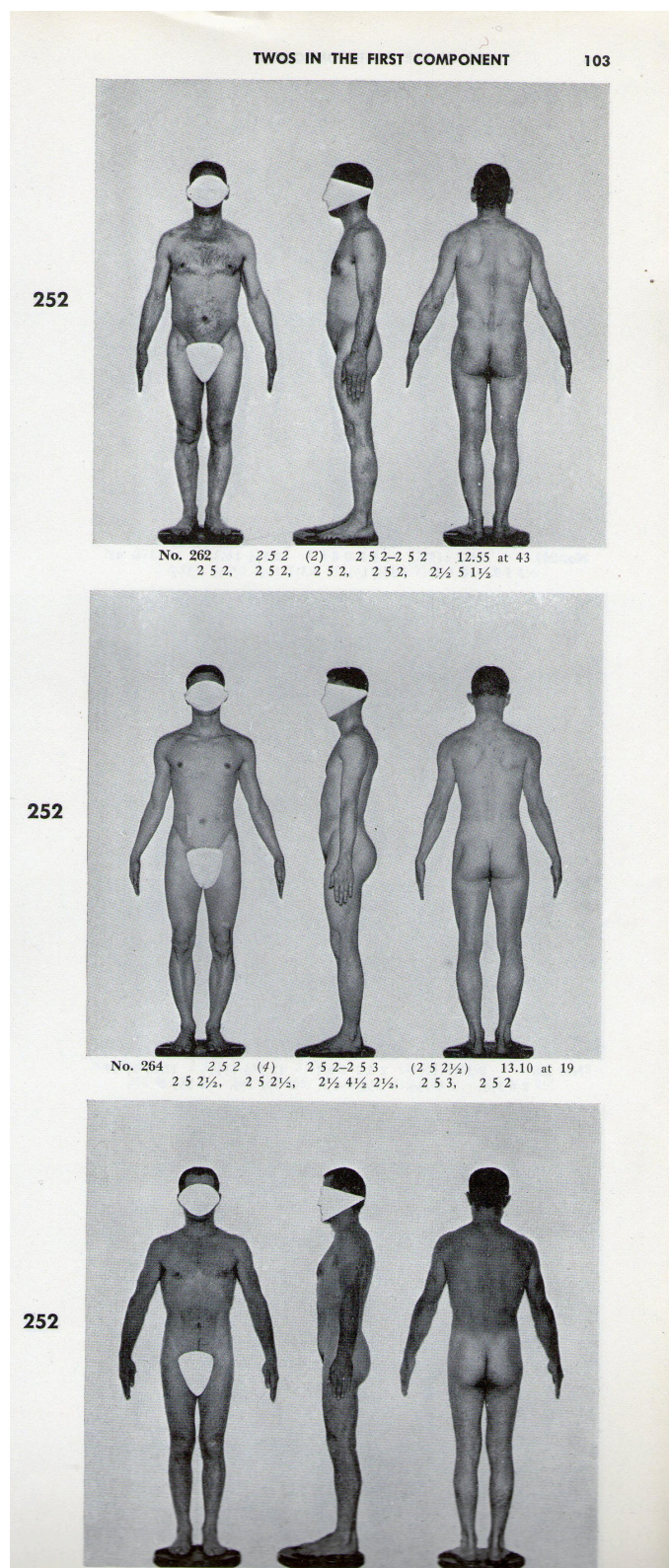


Image taken from *Atlas of Men: A Guide for Somatotyping the Adult Male at All Ages*

The Artwork

I have created a series of paintings and printed materials as a response to my research findings. The paintings I've created are a type of excerpt from my own 'Atlas of Women', depicting the women I wanted to look like as a child. I borrowed from Sheldon's visual language by using the same positioning that he used in displaying his findings. Although I borrowed from Sheldon's visual language, I made sure to produce artwork in my personal style. I used mixed media to create the paintings—specifically a mixture of oil paint, graphite, and other unexpected textural materials.

In creating the artwork, I faced challenges with the size and shape of my canvases; I produced large-scale paintings. I also faced the challenge of connecting the various aspects of the executed pieces together—the challenge of tying my graphic design pieces with the textural painted pieces. To join my painting and graphic design disciplines, I created a way (through color, framing, and texture) in which both types of artwork aesthetically inform and relate to each other.

I believe nudity is imperative to re-creating the clinical feel of the specimen photographs used in the various pseudoscience practices that I found in my research. In the paintings I created, the figures have a type of anonymity seeing that the face and genitals are 'cut out'—this provides the same clinical feeling found in Sheldon's study. Although some may argue that my use of solely female models might objectify, I feel that the nudity in the paintings does more than objectify the female—it creates a sense of 'humanness' and vulnerability that I believe unites the overarching themes in my research project. I want the viewer to feel and experience the vulnerability in my artwork, the vulnerability that comes from the long journey to self-acceptance.

Summary

In this project I want to express my experiences as a Black female and my search for identity within society's classification systems. I don't believe that I can ever fully tackle the issues surrounding pseudoscience. My intent was to analyze my childhood thoughts in an effort to understand who I am as a person now. I'm very interested in dissecting my past and my thought processes, to see where and when the need to classify myself came about. I want to examine the feelings I had growing up—wanting to be anyone but myself, feelings of inadequacy, and the formation of my identity as a Black female. I do not agree with the conclusions found in my research, that someone's physical appearance determines their character, intelligence, and, essentially, their soul; however, I want to raise questions in the viewer's mind about how these ideas may still be undercurrents in our society. My ultimate goal is to create a project that visually expresses the link between the ideas of race, classification of humans, and the search for identity. By reinventing William Herbert Sheldon's *Atlas of Men* to fit my thesis concept through the creation of a type of 'Atlas of Women', I hope to create a series of compelling paintings and printed pieces that will relate to my journey of identity and self-acceptance, through the lens of human classification based on physical characteristics.

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